

THE NIGHTINGALE *LUSCINIA MEGARHYNCHOS*, THE SPROSSER *LUSCINIA LUSCINIA* AND THE IRANIA *IRANIA GUTTURALIS* IN KENYA

D.J. Pearson

Two species of *Luscinia* occur commonly as Palaearctic visitors to Kenya, the Nightingale *L. megarhynchos*, which is primarily a wintering bird, and the Sprosser *L. luscinia*, which is mainly a passage migrant. Both are unobtrusive species of thicket and dense cover, which spend much time on or near the ground and seldom afford good views. They are active and vocal, however, at dawn and dusk, and although similar, the songs of the two species are sufficiently distinct to provide a valuable aid to identification. The Irania (or White-throated Robin) *Irania gutturalis* is a closely related Palaearctic species with a rather similar distribution in Kenya to that of the Sprosser. It is another skulking bird of low thicket, but tends to frequent drier habitat than the *Luscinia* species. On passage, however, all three birds are likely to be found together.

Distributions are mapped and compared here using a system similar to that previously employed for migrant passerines in Kenya and Uganda (Pearson 1978, 1982). In the species accounts which follow, statements unsupported by references are based on Pearson & Backhurst (1976a, b), annual accounts of migration at Ngulia Lodge for the years 1976 to 1982 published in *Scopus* (not listed under References), records listed in East African Bird Reports for 1977 to 1982 (published as the fifth issues of *Scopus* volumes 1 to 6 and not listed here under References) and unpublished records of the author and observers listed under Acknowledgements.

NIGHTINGALE *LUSCINIA MEGARHYNCHOS*

The Nightingale breeds throughout Europe to about 53°N, in the Magreb and in southwest Asia to about 100°E. The brightly coloured nominate race of Europe and Asia Minor is replaced by the larger, browner *africana* between the Black and Caspian Seas, and in Syria, Iraq and northern Iran, and by the even larger, greyer *hafizi* in the U.S.S.R. east of the Volga and the Caspian Sea (Vaurie 1959). The species winters in humid country in sub-Saharan Africa, to the edge of the Congo basin in the west and to Uganda and northern Tanzania in the east. In Kenya it occurs commonly from sea level to 1800 m, but is confined mainly to east central and southeastern areas, from Meru and Embu Districts, Nairobi and the Nguruman to the coast (Fig. 1).

It winters in green thicket, especially along the Athi and Tana Rivers and their tributaries, and in dry woodland and patchy cover bordering cultivation in Kitui, Kibwezi and Taita-Taveta Districts. It also occurs in coastal scrub and in doum palm and other thicket in open *Acacia* woodland. Wintering birds are commonly sedentary for weeks or months at a time. They defend territories aggressively and sing strongly between December and March.

The first birds may be recorded late in October (earliest date 22nd), but most arrive during November. Records at Ngulia Lodge have provided evidence of a small passage across Tsavo, concentrated mainly during early to mid November, but continuing through December. Most birds leave wintering sites late in March, only a few remaining to early April (latest record 13th). There is generally little sign of northward passage, but in some years concentrations have been noted at the coast early in April.

The Nightingales which occur in central and eastern Kenya may be assigned to either *africana* or *hafizi*. Indeed, apart from birds which remain in Ethiopia (Ash 1973) these eastern races appear to be confined in winter to Kenya and

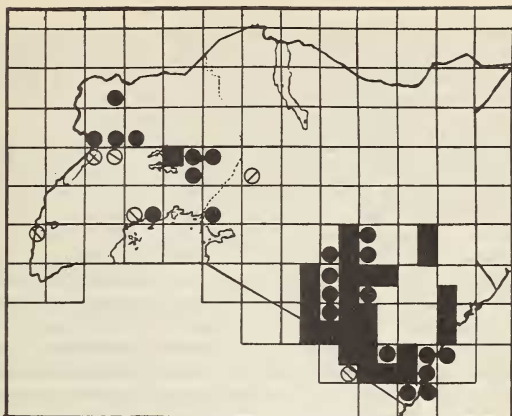


Fig. 1. Recorded distribution of the Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos* in Kenya and Uganda

Squares: common to abundant. Ten or more per day likely to be seen in the square in appropriate habitat

Circles: rare to uncommon. Fewer than ten per day likely to be seen

● ■ Recorded 1 Jan to 20 Mar

○ □ Recorded only Sep to Dec (autumn)

◊ ◻ Recorded 21 Mar to May (spring)

⊗ ⊘ Recorded only in autumn and spring

border regions of north and northeast Tanzania. In birds caught for ringing at Nairobi the ratio of *hafizi* (including *hafizi/africana* intergrades) to *africana* has been less than 1:4 (16 birds examined), whilst at Ngulia it has been much higher (over 2:3; nearly 300 examined), and at the coast *hafizi* predominates.

The Nightingale also winters in Uganda (Fig. 1). It is locally abundant in dry woodland undergrowth at the eastern end of Kyoga (Rolfe & Pearson 1973) and presumably elsewhere around that lake. There are also records along the Nile in the northwest, from Lake Victoria at Entebbe, Kampala and Mpumu and (once) from Lake Edward. With the exception of a *hafizi* near Kampala (Pearson 1972) birds caught for ringing and the few specimens from Uganda have been of the nominate race. Two birds caught in central Nyanza in February were probably also nominate. British Museum (Nat. Hist.) specimens from southern and western Sudan are all nominate birds, and it seems likely that Uganda is the usual southern wintering limit of Nightingale populations from southeast Europe and/or Asia Minor. Certainly most of the birds that occur there are quite distinct from the Asiatic populations wintering in Kenya.

SPROSSER *LUSCINIA LUSCINIA*

This species has a more northern and a rather more limited Palaearctic range than the Nightingale, breeding from the southern Baltic, Poland, eastern Czechoslovakia and Romania through the U.S.S.R. between latitudes 45° and 60°N to about 90°E (Vaurie 1959). It migrates entirely through the Middle East to non-breeding quarters confined to eastern Africa. A few birds remain in

Ethiopia and Kenya, but most winter from southern Tanzania and eastern Zambia south to Mozambique, Botswana and the Transvaal (Vaurie 1959). This is mainly a passage migrant in Kenya, again confined to central and southern areas, and, although it has been recorded on migration in southeast Sudan (G. Nikolaus, pers. comm.) there are no traceable records for Uganda.

The first Sprossers arrive in central and southeast Kenya late in October (earliest record 11th), usually before the beginning of the short rains. In lower areas they are usually confined at first to the small patches of green thicket remaining near springs and watercourses. Southward movement occurs east of Lake Turkana, Laikipia and the Aberdares (Fig. 2a). The species is common during November at Marsabit, near the Mathews Range, and at Isiolo, Embu, Thika, Nairobi and Namanga, and there are records at this time from Naru Moru and Naivasha, and more rarely from Nakuru, Baringo and Nyanza. The main migration, however, appears to be concentrated further east, through Meru, Kitui, Machakos and Kibwezi Districts, and Tsavo, passing to the east of Mt Kilimanjaro. Passage is recorded later in these eastern areas. Thus, the heavy movement at Ngulia lasts mainly from early November to mid December, and birds stop over in large numbers in the *Acacia-Commiphora* bushlands only after the vegetation has leafed out, usually from late November to late December. The eastern edge of the migration also seems quite well defined. Thus, there are occasional records east to Garissa, Kalalu Ranch (south of the Galana) and Maungu, but none from the coast and lower Tana valley, or from the northeast.

As a wintering bird, the Sprosser is far less abundant than the Nightingale, and more restricted both geographically and in terms of habitat. It is found locally east of the highlands between 500 and 1500 m, in Meru and Kitui Districts, and from Nairobi and Namanga to Machakos, Kibwezi, Voi and the Taita Hills (Fig. 2a). The species is certainly regular at a few sites but seems to winter in others only in 'green' years with protracted 'short' rains. The thicket habitat favoured by wintering Sprossers is generally moister with more luxuriant herbaceous growth than that typically utilized by the Nightingale. Damp wooded hollows seems to be characteristically preferred, and it is noteworthy that Sprossers are scarce in winter along the larger river courses where Nightingales are common. On passage, Sprossers are found in a variety of more open thicket and scrub situations. Like the Nightingale, the Sprosser is typically sedentary in winter quarters and sings strongly. Similar behaviour is also observed during autumn passage when transit birds commonly establish and occupy territories for up to two or three weeks.

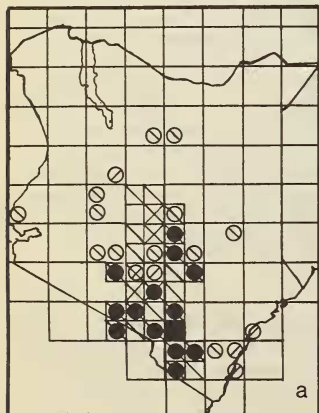
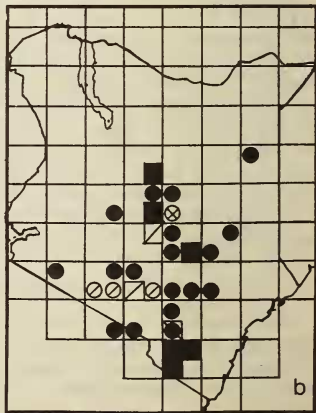


Fig. 2. Distribution of (a) the Sprosser *Luscinia luscinia* and (b) the Irania *Irania gutturalis* in Kenya. Conventions as for Fig. 1



The northward passage of the Sprosser through Kenya is less protracted and generally less noticeable than the autumn one. It occurs mainly during late March and the first half of April, but with occasional records up to 24 April. Birds are noted regularly along the eastern edge of the highlands, and are common in some years on the coast. Occasional large falls at Ngulia and at Mtito Andei (Pearson 1980, 1981) have indicated considerable movement across the eastern bushlands, but to judge from the scarcity of spring records from most areas, far more birds must overfly Kenya in spring than in autumn.

IRANIA IRANIA GUTTURALIS

The Irania has a breeding range restricted to southwest Asia, from Asia Minor, the Caucasus and the eastern Mediterranean to Iran, northern Afghanistan and Soviet Turkestan (Vaurie 1959). It is known only as a passage migrant in Ethiopia and Somalia (Ash 1980, Ash & Miskell 1983), and is unrecorded in Uganda. Its wintering range would seem to be restricted to Kenya and Tanzania. In Tanzania it is known mainly from the northeast and the dry interior, but has recently been seen as far south as Mbeya (J.S.S. Beesley, in litt.). In Kenya it winters in plateau country north and east of the highlands, mainly between 300 and 1500 m. It typically frequents low thicket in *Acacia* or *Commiphora* bushland, often along gullies and watercourses or in dry scrub bordering marginal cultivation. Although it usually prefers drier habitats than the *Luscinia* species, it is often found in leafy situations alongside the Nightingale, and seems to avoid the hotter, more arid lowlands. It has been recorded as wintering commonly at Isiolo, north of Mt Ololokwe, in eastern Meru and Kitui Districts, in Tsavo and on the lower slopes of the Taita Hills. There are also January to mid March records from Garissa and Wajir, and to the west from Laikipia, Machakos, Athi River, Nairobi, Namanga and the Mara (Fig. 2b).

The first autumn birds are usually recorded early in November (earliest date 5th). Observations at Ngulia have indicated a considerable and protracted passage from November to early January. Birds are commonly found in and around Tsavo late in December and early in January, presumably on passage stopover, for most move on as the bushlands dry out.

Spring passage birds have been found in several recent years along the eastern edge of the highlands, from the Nyambenis and the Mt Kenya foothills to Nairobi and Kajiado, and also in Tsavo. Most spring records span the period 20 March to 15 April (latest 18 April), and this species usually lingers in Kenya rather longer than the Nightingale.

DISCUSSION

Migration routes

Nightingales and Iranias reaching wintering sites in Kenya in November and December are of southwest Asian origin. Most presumably migrate through central or eastern Ethiopia and cross north or northeast Kenya. Sprossers, on the other hand, are from eastern European as well as western Asian breeding areas. They arrive in November after spending the previous two months mainly in easternmost Sudan and in Ethiopia west of the rift (Ash 1973, 1980, Nikolaus & Pearson 1982, G. Nikolaus pers. comm.), so that immigration appears to be from a direction west of north, perhaps even across the northern end of Lake Turkana. Arrivals of Nightingales and Iranias are probably associated with those of other Asiatic birds such as Red-tailed Shrikes *Lanius isabellinus* and eastern Whitethroats *Sylvia communis icterops*. Sprossers, however, are clearly associated on southward passage with Marsh Warblers *Acrocephalus palustris* and River Warblers *Locustella fluviatilis*, which would appear to

follow a similar route, not only through Kenya but through northeast Sudan and Ethiopia (Ash 1980, Nikolaus & Pearson 1982, Nikolaus 1983). Some Sprossers evidently follow a more easterly route across Kenya in spring than in autumn, and in fact the species appears to have a generally more eastern migration through the horn of Africa in spring and is not known in April from the Sudan (G. Nikolaus pers. comm.). A more detailed picture of its occurrence in Ethiopia during the two passage seasons would be valuable.

Interspecific competition

The species considered here are most likely to be found together at times of migration when a greater variety of habitats is tolerated. All three could well appear, for example, in *Lantana* or other dry scrub, or in semi-arid bushland. Thus, Nightingales and Sprossers are commonly found together around Nairobi in November, and passage Iranias usually accompany Sprossers during late March and early April. Of the three species, Sprossers prefer the wettest wintering habitat, and Iranias the driest. There is considerable direct interaction and apparent competition between Sprossers and Nightingales where they winter together, but they do tend to segregate, Sprossers occupying sites with ranker undergrowth, sometimes with Nightingales singing from drier thicket within 50 m. The relative preferences of these two species in Kenya are similar to those found in eastern Europe and in Ethiopia (Voous 1960, Ash 1973). Iranias and Nightingales also winter together in Kenya, for example in marginal semi-cultivated country in Kitui District and near the Taita Hills, but it is not clear to what extent they compete with each other.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the following for providing records and assistance: J.S. Ash, G.C. Backhurst, P.L. Britton, A.E. Butterworth, M.P.L. Fogden, P.C. Lack, A.D. Lewis, D.E. Pomeroy, J.G. Rolfe, J. Squire, T. Stevenson, D.A. Turner, A.P. Zeigler, the British Museum (Nat. Hist.) and the National Museum, Nairobi.

REFERENCES

- ASH, J.S. 1973. *Luscinia megarhynchos* and *L. luscinia* in Ethiopia. *Ibis* 115: 267-269.
- 1980. Migrational status of Palaearctic birds in Ethiopia. *Proceedings of the IVth Pan-African Ornithological Congress*: 199-208.
- & MISKELL, J.E. 1983. Birds of Somalia. *Scopus* Special Supplement No. 1.
- NIKOLAUS, G. 1983. An important passerine ringing site near the Sudan Red Sea coast. *Scopus* 7: 15-18.
- & PEARSON, D.J. 1982. Autumn passage of Marsh Warblers *Acrocephalus palustris* and Sprossers *Luscinia luscinia* on the Sudan Red Sea coast. *Scopus* 6: 17-19.
- PEARSON, D.J. 1972. Some migrant bird records from the Kampala area, Uganda. *EAHNS Bulletin* 1972: 27-29.
- 1978. The genus *Sylvia* in Kenya and Uganda. *Scopus* 2: 63-71.
- 1980. Northward spring passage of Palaearctic passerines across Tsavo. *Scopus* 4: 25-28.
- 1981. Spring falls of Palaearctic passerines at Mtito Andei. *Scopus* 5: 80-81.

- PEARSON, D.J. 1982. The migration and wintering of Palaearctic *Acrocephalus* warblers in Kenya and Uganda. *Scopus* 6: 49-59.
- & BACKHURST, G.C. 1976a. The southward migration of Palaearctic birds over Ngulia, Kenya. *Ibis* 118: 78-105.
- 1976b. Palaearctic passerine migration at Kariobangi, Nairobi. *EANHS Bulletin* 1976: 23-28.
- ROLFE, J.G. & PEARSON, D.J. 1973. Some recent records of Palaearctic migrants from eastern Uganda. *EANHS Bulletin* 1973: 62-66.
- VAURIE, C. 1959. *The birds of the Palearctic fauna. Order Passeriformes.* London: Witherby.
- VOOUS, K.H. 1960. *Atlas of European birds.* London: Nelson.
- D.J. Pearson, Department of Biochemistry, University of Nairobi, Box 30197, Nairobi

(Received 17 February 1984)